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Communal Farms

Red China's Greatest Gamble

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SINGAPORE—The young farmer in the tattered undershirt and faded blue trousers led me down a narrow raised path between shimmering fields of transplanted rice. Far across the rolling green plain rose that mountain barrier of Kuehuan which the Japanese had never ventured to cross. This was the rich and tranquil country of southwest China.

The farmer paused and pointed. "You see those two ponds over there? Stocked with fish fry. We shall have enough for ourselves and to spare for the market. And that field beyond is for potatoes. They are a fine secondary crop; and what's more we make wine from them, too."

"You don't waste much," I said, nodding to a large group of young children working quietly on a nearby patch. "Waste?" The farmer looked at me in amazement. "Here, come and see the pigs." Amid a complex of sties, two barefoot peasant girls were pitching swill to about a hundred sleek sows and porkers.

Just across the way were the byres where half a dozen men were washing down the cows. It was all almost absurdly clean and orderly. We might have been in Switzerland.

At first glance, in fact, this looked like a well-run farm anywhere in the world. But as I walked round I began to notice differences. There was not just one large homestead but scores of small ones, revealing that thousands of peasants lived and worked on these acres.

Boundaries Removed

All boundary markings had been removed and the verges ploughed up for crops. There were no tractors, no signs of mechanization, but in the fields I saw teams of farmworkers, 40 and 50 strong—long lines of men and women patiently working with their hands. The only implements to be seen were a few two-wheeled double-bladed ploughs.

Some of the farmsteads were being pulled down, while in the middle distance stood a gray barrack of a place, looking like a penitentiary on a moor. This was a communal dormitory

with a central kitchen and general canteen which could seat 500. Behind each of its many doors was a new home for families moved from the downed cottages—two diminutive earth-floored rooms.

For this was not just a farm, but an Agricultural Producers' Cooperative.

When the Chinese Communists first took over, they confiscated all land from the landlords and redistributed it in small parcels to the enthusiastic peasants. By degrees, however, the peasants were then forced into joining cooperatives in which all members pooled both their land, for which they were paid rent, and their labor, for which they received piecework pay. The cooperative did all its marketing and buying through the State.

By this year, these cooperatives—to which 97 per cent of peasant households are said to belong—had become "advanced;" the peasant received nothing for his land any more. He was once again a paid laborer, directed by a cooperative committee which he helped elect, and only dignified by the holding of one share in the company, as it were.

Single Voice Drowned

Today even this last vestigial stake is becoming meaningless, for the cooperatives themselves are being grouped into large "people's communes" in which his single voice is drowned.

But the Lixin Li Cooperative was also, I found, playing its part in an even more important drama: "Now this question of waste," the cooperative vice-director reiterated firmly. "You see those fields over there? They're experimental. From what we have learned from them we know we can get two rice crops and one wheat crop out of the same patch of land every year. But to do this you have to waste nothing, to give the land everything you've got."

He pointed to about 30 women tearing out clumps of grass and to others clearing weed from a pond, their conical bamboo hats bobbing and dipping in the sunlight.

"Team"—the 562 households of the cooperative are divided into these teams whose leaders take orders from the committee—"they're collecting green manure. We use everything we can lay our hands on for fertilizer. This year we are spreading about three tons of it per acre, but to reach our new production targets we reckon to put down up to 400, even 500, tons per acre next year."

There was an awkward silence as he sensed my disbelief and we continued our tour. I remarked the solid advantages the cooperative bought for its members from its profits—the small tidy dispensary and clinic staffed by three nurses; the little primary school, and the meeting hall.

Experimental Figures

But, sipping hot water in the cool, bare office of the committee, my host and his colleagues returned to their theme. This year, wheat output on the farm would reach 1,000 lbs. per acre, but next year it would be 22,000 lbs. per acre—nearly thirteen times as much. The first rice crop of 1958 had yielded 3,600 lbs. per acre. The second would yield nearly 20,000 lbs.

When I queried these figures I found they were based on the yields of the highly dosed experimental acreage. The vice-director nevertheless insisted that comparable increases in production could be achieved by ploughing deeper, using better seeds and more fertilizer and planting so closely that 10 shoots would grow where one grew today.

This was not just an isolated case of excited figuring. The national planning of China is based on such forecasts. But can the Chinese repeat on a nationwide scale anything like the output achieved on a few thousand selected acres? And will the soil stand up to such treatment? Or are the Communists about to turn their country into a dust-bowl?

Agricultural experts agree that modern science has opened up the way for almost incredible leaps in output, and China, already producing nearly 39 million

tons of wheat—two million tons more than the United States—70 per cent more than last year, China also has vast expanses of land as yet untilled in her outer provinces.

Poor Today...

But the question-mark remains. Buoyed up by their promised share of the prosperity these brilliant increases in productivity should bring, China's 500 million peasants are putting up with poverty today. At the Lixin Li Cooperative I learned that the workers themselves were paid only about £60 per household—or £15 a head in kind or money—for the entire year of 1957.

Furthermore, this grain gamble is important in a far wider context. It is of vital interest to the world that China should be able to finance her industrial program with agricultural produce and still feed her growing population without being obliged to expand outwards.

In 1958 the Chinese immediately launched a family planning campaign and exhibitions of brutally frank anatomical diagrams which I saw all over China gave the impression that this was being sustained.

But the more, in their new aggressive mood, the leaders in Peking boast of the power represented by China's "600 million and more" people, the more unconvincing the birth-control campaign becomes.

"Malthus was wrong," a charming old lady told me in Peking. "An increase in population does not lead to shortages; on the contrary it leads to increased production." The fact that she was director of the maternity department of the Ministry of Health, and therefore at the center of the family planning campaign, tells its own story.

Today about every one human in four is a Chinese. In 30 years there may easily be one billion of them. One can only hope that Peking's dream of increased farming output does not turn into a nightmare, not only for China, but for the rest of the world.